The BBC, group listening, and 'The Changing World'

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Abstract: This article examines the content and impact of a series of BBC lecture courses broadcast in the early 1930s. The Group Listening Scheme was established in 1928: experts working in a variety of fields were invited to broadcasts a series of evening lectures. Adults across the country were encouraged to gather for the lectures and stay on afterwards to discuss them. 'The Changing World' consisted of half-hour talks over six evenings a week during a six-month period. The broadcasts amounted to a two-term syllabus, with 24 talks devoted to each of the six themes (the modern dilemma, industry and trade, literature and art, science, the modern state, and education and leisure). This article will sample some of these broadcasts and explore the listener response to the series in order to reach an understanding of the BBC's achievements in adult education during the interwar period.

Keywords: adult education, BBC, Changing World, Listening Group Activities, Lambert, Hadow.

The BBC, Group Listening, and 'The Changing World'

The late 1920s and early '30s were a fertile period for the BBC's experiments in adult education, forming part of a wider trend towards extramural education at this time. The University Extension Movement had been established in the 1870s under the auspices of Oxford and Cambridge, aiming to provide tertiary-level education to those unable to attend a university. Students attended lectures and classes in their local area, and could submit written work to be marked by the lecturer, and, provided their work had reached a satisfactory level, they could enter for an examination at the end of the course. Some lecturers, such as Richard G. Moulton, Cambridge Extension lecturer in literature and classics in the 1880s and '90s, had regularly drawn hundreds of students to each of his weekly lectures across the country. Thereafter the Workers' Educational Association (WEA), which gained momentum after 1908, expanded throughout the interwar period, reaching a membership of close to 30,000 in the late 1930s. Meanwhile the *1919 Report* (produced by the Ministry of Reconstruction) came out in support of a large-scale expansion of extramural initiatives, which it regarded as a central part of the educational system, rather than simply a makeshift endeavour. Extramural teaching departments were later established in almost every university in England. The BBC's Listening Scheme, established in 1928, was the Corporation's most serious contribution to these educational endeavours. Briefly put, group listening was designed so that experts working in a variety of fields (such as economics, politics, literature, and so on) were invited to broadcast a series of evening lectures, while adults across the country were encouraged to gather for weekly tutorial-style meetings to listen to the programmes and engage in discussion afterwards. For some lecture courses the BBC provided study pamphlets with suggestions for further reading, and recommended that each group have a designated leader to direct the post-broadcast discussion; training sessions were even provided for effective group leadership, with the first such course taking place at University College Hull in April 1929. This article will focus in particular on the content and the impact of a series of lecture courses broadcast over a 24-week period from September 1931 until March 1932. In what was the most ambitious programme of broadcasts to date, six courses grouped under the title 'The Changing World' were run in parallel, with each given a designated day and allotted a half hour slot in the evening (Saturdays were left free). This high-profile series, which aimed to address the social, political and scientific issues of the day with contributors including T. S. Eliot, John Dover Wilson, Julian Huxley, and William Beveridge, was held up by BBC insiders and listeners alike as a broadcasting model, a reference point for all future programming. This article will begin by offering some context

for the series, briefly outlining the more important steps taken by the BBC up to this point (the early 1930s) regarding provisions for adult education, and the varying success of these schemes; thereafter it will look more closely at 'The Changing World', exploring the reasons behind its creation, the content of a sample of broadcasts, and the reaction to them from the BBC, print media, and the listening public alike.

From its establishment in 1922 the British Broadcasting Company (which was chartered as a public service corporation in 1927) had taken seriously its potential for disseminating knowledge on a scale never attempted (or deemed possible) before. In its first Director-General, John Reith, the BBC hired a man possessed of an unwavering faith in the moralising effect of 'high culture' and determined to use the wireless as a didactic tool. An Education Advisory Committee was formed as early as 1923, with J. C. Stobart joining the BBC from the Board of Education to take up the role of Education Director in 1924, in overall charge of schools and adult education work. And in October 1926 a Joint Committee of Inquiry into Broadcasting and Adult Education was set up by the BBC and the British Institute of Adult Education, chaired by Sir W. H. Hadow, to investigate how the wireless might best be mobilised for the cause of adult education.[1] Meanwhile other significant developments during these first years included the appointment in April 1927 of R. S. Lambert as an Assistant in Adult Education, working in Stobart's Education Department, and with Charles Siepmann joining him as his assistant in October that year. Lambert's appointment in particular was a tremendous coup for the BBC: he was a driving force in adult education circles in the interwar period – a full-time extramural tutor for the universities of Sheffield and London, Secretary of the Association of Tutorial Class Tutors, a member of the General Committee of the British Institute of Adult Education, and editor of the official Workers' Educational Association (WEA) journal *The Highway*.[2] Meanwhile the Hadow Committee presented its findings in March 1928, and two suggestions stood out from the Report: firstly, it recommended the establishment of an adult education magazine (this would be *The Listener*, launched in 1929 with Lambert as first editor), and secondly, it urged the encouragement of 'discussion groups' to support more structured, systematic wireless listening, and to this end recommended that a Central Council for Adult Education should be formed, representing all the more important adult education bodies, and supported by Area Councils representing local opinion and local organisations.[3] The result of this latter recommendation was the establishment of the BBC's Group Listening Scheme, and this enjoyed a brief period of palpable popularity: Roger Fieldhouse notes that 'In two years there were 664 listening groups, with leaders trained by the first BBC education officers', and 'By the year 1932-3

there were 1,738 groups organised in four areas of the country', with groups varying from 'six people to a hundred'.[4]

Wireless Listening Groups

The character of these discussion groups differed dramatically in size and formality: some would do little more than listen to the weekly broadcasts, and might simply be a small gathering of friends meeting up each week in someone's house. A 1932 article in *The Listener* suggested that the 'fireside type of discussion group' was 'particularly appropriate' for female listeners who were keen to introduce some intellectual conversation into their social gatherings but still meet up in comfortable surroundings.[5] Other groups were more organised: they were either created specifically for the purpose of listening to the broadcasts, or they gathered under the auspices of existing educational structures such as the WEA, adult schools, and technical and other evening institutes. Local Education Authorities were increasingly coming into partnership, sponsoring local groups, publicising them, and recruiting the leader. Typical town groups were made up of clerks, housewives, industrial workers and teachers, and were often confined to one particular social class per group, whereas rural gatherings were more diverse, consisting of a cross-section of the community: a gardener, shopkeeper, the postman, farmer, cobbler, and so on.[6] Regardless of membership, informality was regarded as a key factor in the success of the listening movement, and young men in particular (many of school age and a little older) were willing to miss social events in order to attend: the main point was to 'have a good time intellectually and socially', and the lack of 'dogmatic tests', 'official regulations', and 'educational exclusiveness' encouraged many to join.[7] As noted above, groups were encouraged to appoint a trained group leader to initiate discussion and debate following the broadcast lecture, with the BBC organising training courses over the summer to arm them with techniques to keep the discussion flowing. *The Listener*, a central conduit for information about adult education activities, published numerous articles to advertise these group leadership conferences, encouraging them to pool their experiences and to meet speakers of successful series, with bursaries offered for attendees. In 1931 the BBC also published a pamphlet, *Discussion Groups: What They Are and How to Run Them*, with tips for anyone wishing to start a group. Regional Education Officers were responsible for encouraging listening groups in their area, and the workload was heavy: they addressed meetings, offered advice on how to start a group, secured group leaders, supplied information about forthcoming talks, drew attention to

groups about the facilities for further study provided by adult education bodies in the area, answered all enquiries, and organised conferences to train group leaders.

Such was the growing confidence within the Corporation about group listening that the Education Department predicted the whole country would eventually be covered by a network of recreative and educational discussion groups. A *Listener* editorial from 23 September 1931 titled 'The New Extension Movement' emphasised the 'success of broadcasting as a cultural agency', quoting from John A. Hobson to argue that 'broadcasting must come to rank as the popular educator, supplementing, and even in a measure displacing, the ordinary apparatus of the school and press'.[8] But articles such as this were part of the BBC's attempts to harness grassroots support for the scheme and promote it more widely; any assessment of listening groups must take into account the participants' experience of their involvement. A questionnaire sent out to group leaders by W. E. Williams, probably the leading advocate for adult education in the middle decades of the twentieth century, is therefore worth careful consideration.[9] Some of the responses to the questionnaire were published in a 1941 co-written volume, *Radio's Listening Groups*, which compared the success of the Listening Group Movement in Britain and America. Williams's findings reveal that groups tended to meet for a short period ahead of the broadcast, either to reflect on the previous week's programme, or to introduce that evening's talk and address any issues likely to be raised. Thereafter the wireless is switched on, with listeners generally encouraged to take notes throughout the twenty- to thirty-minute broadcast. Following a brief pause for reflection (or to allow for 'the incorrigible British habit of tea-drinking'),[10] the discussion begins, generally lasting no more than forty-five minutes to hour. This is the stage, Williams writes, 'in which occurs the widest possible variety': the more accomplished group leaders might select a few points from the broadcast which seemed to him 'crucial and provocative', and elicit from these a debate; or instead ask the group for their view on the 'key issues of the talk', and 'select from these suggestions one or two major topics for the subsequent discussion'.[11] Some broadcasters ended their talks with a list of salient discussion points for groups to consider, and the less confident group leaders tended to take their lead from these and from the 'Suggestions for Reading' included in the pamphlets published to accompany the series; others invited in a special guest to shed further light on the topic: 'a schoolmaster if the talk is about education, a farmer is the subject is agriculture'.[12] Those leaders wishing to increase the systematic character of the exercise appointed a panel, made up of group members, to 'draw up a report of the whole series', with this report then issued, 'in stencil form, at the end of the series'.[13] Others organised a 'logbook', with 'one member of the

group writ[ing] up a brief record of the last discussion' which is read the following week and 'serves as a useful "refresher" for the discussions'.[14]

Plenty of positive first-hand testimony about the running of these groups was also included in Williams's book: one particularly successful report came from a group of workers at a motor factory who had previously struggled with the standard of work at the Central Technical College. Disillusioned with their jobs and anxious for self-improvement, they decided to organise themselves into a discussion group based around Professor Pear's series of talks 'Making Work Worth While' in the spring of 1930. The College was able to lend them a room to use, got hold of copies of the 'Aids to Study' pamphlet and *The Listener*, and borrowed the suggested books from the city libraries. The first post-broadcast discussion lasted so long that it had to be postponed until the following week, and the group kept up regular attendance of 18 members contributing to 'enthusiastic and general' discussions: 'The depth to which they delved and the amount of reading done were surprising'.[15] The emphasis in that group was on education (the report describes how the factory workers asked for suggestions about 'subjects of study to fit them for promotion *if it ever came*' as 'intelligence and ambition were useless in the productions shop').[16] Reports on listening groups can be found within various memoranda submitted to the BBC, and when the feedback was particularly good, it tended to be because the level of discussion was so high (rather than focusing on aspects such as the content or delivery of the broadcast). An Education Officer sitting in a group in Rotherham Public Library stated that 'I have seldom heard such pointed and balanced discussion in such a group as this',[17] and one visiting a group in Northumberland during the programme 'Men Talking' suggested that these gatherings 'are of real value to people in the villages, especially in the direction of encouraging them to express their own views on what is happening in the world around them'.[18] We can conclude from these statements (and many more along the same lines) that group listening prioritised discussion over the gathering of information, and this had a long history within adult education circles, following a similar model to the WEA tutorial, and classes in the University Extension Movement. While the BBC was committed to providing broadcast material of the highest possible quality, a group meeting was still deemed a failure if the discussion failed to cohere.[19] The emphasis was on supportive, congenial peer-group learning, as the most fruitful approach to improving awareness and understanding of any issues covered.

'The Changing World' Series

The BBC's 'The Changing World' series, which consisted of half-hour talks over six evenings a week during a six-month period, was the most ambitious set of educational broadcasts attempted by the BBC up to that point. The series ran from September to December 1931, and from January to March 1932; taken together, the broadcasts amounted to an extensive two-term syllabus, with 24 talks devoted to each of the six themes (the modern dilemma, industry and trade, literature and art, science, the modern state, and education and leisure), and the lectures delivered by the most eminent intellectuals of the day. Before looking at the impact of these broadcasts, it is worth considering the BBC's rationale for such a costly and strenuous undertaking. 'The Changing World' was a way for the BBC to demonstrate how seriously it took its responsibility as a self-defined 'popular educator' and agent for stimulating intellectual thought: as later sections of this article will show, this was a rigorous and systematic series which demanded focused listening in order to follow. But the series was also contemporaneous with important global events, anticipating the worldwide economic crisis which reached Britain in 1931, when exports were badly hit, and industrial decline led to rising unemployment. This unsettled economy contributed to political crisis and the collapse of the Labour government; an all-party National Government was formed in August 1931, and a general election called two months later. The BBC was able to use this accident of timing to its advantage: although 'The Changing World' series had been in planning for several months prior to these events, to an outsider it looked as though the BBC was responding quickly and decisively to contemporary concerns, opting to educate the populace by providing listeners with in-depth analysis: a balanced, democratic, non-partisan view of the contemporary landscape.

Although the BBC was attempting to market itself as a 'popular educator', this series was aimed squarely at an educated audience: in a letter from Head of Adult Education Charles Siepmann to T. S. Eliot (a contributor to the 'modern dilemma' strand) in November 1931, he wrote that he was looking for 'someone representative of the younger generation' to fill the final slots before Christmas.[20] Siepmann continued, 'Not that anyone can represent that. But I am still in search of someone who will voice the outlook that seems common to a great number of people of the recently post-graduate age'.[21] Yet despite this apparent targeting of university-educated listeners, the BBC's Education Department also wanted to ensure each broadcast was as clearly presented and intelligible as possible. In a letter from R. A. Rendall (the head of Adult Education Talks) to Eliot in March 1932, he offered some suggested edits to one of Eliot's forthcoming talks with a view to enhancing the clarity and directness of the

script: ‘On page 1, simply for the sake of clearness, I suggest that in lines 4 and 5 you actually mention the respective dilemmas to which you are referring … On page 2 I think you ought to give some very simple definition of determinism. It is a word that is often used by speakers in this sort of talk, but I do not believe that listeners have any very clear idea of what it means, and I am afraid your Monte Carlo definition won’t help them.’[22] Later on in the letter Rendall expresses his concerns about engaging the listener in such difficult material:

> The truth is, of course, that this talk contains a great deal of thought; much more thought than most talks; and that being the case I do not see how we can make it easy for the listener. If he is to get anything out of what you have got to say he has got to make an intellectual effort. But how far you will persuade him to make the intellectual effort necessary is going to depend very largely upon the way in which you deliver the talk.[23]

Clearly the Head of Adult Education was not averse to taking an active involvement in the content of the lectures, and Eliot appeared to be in accord, writing to Siepmann of his own concerns that the lectures of one of his fellow contributors to the series, Christopher Dawson, were ‘much too continuously abstract to make a very strong impression on any large public. If he could occasionally descend abruptly to concrete and striking illustrations I think his talks would seem very much more living.’[24]

Eliot and Dawson were just two of the well-known names on an impressive list of contributors to the series. John Macmurray joined them on the Sunday evening ‘modern dilemma’ strand, while Arnold Plant opened Monday’s industry and trade lectures with six talks on ‘How Wealth has Increased’, followed by six from D. H. Robertson on ‘Why Does Poverty Continue?’, and after Christmas, Henry Clay on ‘How Has Private Enterprise Adapted Itself?’, and six final lectures written by all three on ‘How Has the State Met the Change?’ Meanwhile Harold Nicolson presented Tuesday’s literature and art strand with 12 talks on ‘The New Spirit in Literature’ (on modernist writing), followed after Christmas by Sir Barry Jackson (on drama), Kingsley Martin (on the press), and finally J. E. Barton on the subject of modern art. Wednesday’s science slot featured six talks from Julian Huxley (‘What is Man?’) and the same number from Sir William Beveridge (on family life); the ‘modern state’ series on a Thursday evening featured Leonard Woolf lecturing on the future of democracy, Sidney Webb on social issues, and Sir Arthur Salter on ‘The Problem of World Government’. And the final strand, broadcast on Fridays between 7.30pm and 8pm, was titled

'education and leisure', with John Dover Wilson, John Macmurray and Sir Percy Nunn contributing the 12 talks before Christmas ('Learning to Live'), and Delisle Burns presenting another twelve from January to March on 'Modern Life and Modern Leisure.' As that brief overview makes clear, the intellectual credentials of the series were beyond dispute. By this stage William Beveridge was director of the London School of Economics and deeply invested (and well-published) in all matters of social reform; the Beveridge Report would be published in 1942. John Dover Wilson, to take another example, was regarded as Britain's leading Shakespeare scholar, professor of education at King's College, London, who in 1935 would be appointed to the Regius chair of rhetoric and English literature at Edinburgh. And by this stage (the early 1930s) the publication of Julian Huxley's immensely popular three-volume book *The Science of Life* (co-written with H. G. Wells and his son G. P. Wells) had confirmed Huxley as the country's leading popular authority on science, an image further bolstered by his regular appearances on the wireless.[25]

As further testament to the pedagogical aims of 'The Changing World' series, the BBC produced supplementary pamphlets for many of the individual lecture clusters. These were specifically for use by listening groups, serving as an introduction to the subject, and including background material and a recommended reading list for those wishing to study the topic in more depth. The first tranche of pamphlets (priced at 4*d*.) were published in time for the start of the series in September 1931, with further ones planned for the spring 1932 lectures. These provide us with vital information regarding the aims and context for each series, but in the absence of audio recordings, for lecture content we must rely on the printed versions of selected lectures which were reproduced in *The Listener* each week.[26] Harold Nicolson's lectures on modern literature were probably the most controversial broadcasts in the entire series, notorious at the time for Nicolson's refusal of Director-General John Reith's request that he exclude both James Joyce and D. H. Lawrence from the discussion.[27] Each of the twelve lectures were printed in *The Listener*.[28] It is worth focusing briefly on some of the lecture content, and the techniques he used to engage with his audience. Lecture one offered amiable reassurance about the topic of the series ('for the moment, I admit, Mr. Eliot is a hard nut to crack') before posing the series of questions that his subsequent broadcasts would attempt to answer: 'Is there such a thing as the new spirit in literature? If so, whither does it tend and how has it arisen? Who are the exponents of that spirit whom we should read and try to understand? What ideas are at the basis of their mental energy? Why is it that they seem so difficult and so inhuman? What is it that seems to come between us and the proper understanding of their writing? How can we place ourselves in a proper frame of mind to

receive their message?'[29] Subsequent lectures addressed the perceived 'selfishness' of modernist authors who write for a 'tiny clique of intellectuals' (week three),[30] the differences between Victorian and modern writers (week four), and the 'expansion of consciousness' being explored by the modernists (week five).[31] Nicolson also focused in on individual authors: D. H. Lawrence ('a man of unquestionable genius' for whom 'the sex-instinct came to be the symbol of a definite philosophy of life'),[32] Virginia Woolf ('if you allow her lyrical style to permeate gradually into your consciousness you will find you are left with a very definite impression – an impression of certain sounds, lights, colours … which, although unusual and unexpected, do, in the mass, form a new territory of the mind'),[33] and finally James Joyce, who according to Nicolson 'extended the scope of fiction by adding to it the whole vast new territory of sub-conscious thought' and thereby gave his own generation 'a whole new area of self-knowledge'.[34] The accompanying pamphlet (also written by Nicolson) was listed as number two in the series; other titles included John Macmurray's *Education and Leisure*, John A. Hobson's *The Modern State*, and *Industry and Trade* by Henry Clay. As noted above, these pamphlets were designed with discussion groups in mind, aiming to consolidate the information provided in the lectures, and Hobson's *The Modern State* (number four in the pamphlet series) contained a list of 'Books to Read' divided into the various themes covered in the lectures: 'politics of the state', 'democracy', 'social services', 'public ownership and enterprise', and 'internationalism'. And at the back of the pamphlet a 'Suggestions for Discussion' section provided a series of questions relevant to each weekly lecture. These appear to have had a twofold function: firstly, to check learners' understanding of the issues being covered through fact-based questions ('In the improvement of the wage-earner's standard of living in the last fifty years, what part has been played by his own expenditure of his increased wages and by the social services created for him by the State respectively?').[35] And secondly, to open up the post-broadcast discussion through more subjective, open-ended questions: 'Should the first duty of the Government be the happiness of citizens?'; 'What do the words "political equality" mean to you?'; 'Can we avoid becoming citizens of the world, and do we want to avoid it?';[36] 'Have the achievements of the League of Nations come up to your expectations?'[37]

From the outset 'The Changing World' garnered high levels of attention among listening groups: an internal BBC memo recorded that the number of wireless discussion groups in autumn 1931 had increased by 46% from the previous year: 433 compared to an estimated 296 in 1930 with the six 'Changing World' strands the most popular choices – industry and trade were at the top (127 groups met to discuss these broadcasts), followed by lectures on

the modern state (87 groups), and education and leisure, with 81 groups.[38] The numbers increased even further in the spring during the second half of the series, with 499 wireless discussion groups recorded in total, a 58% increase of 315 groups the previous year. Moreover, whereas listening groups had previously been regarded as rather ephemeral, in the 1931-32 session they were only counted if they met for 12 sessions. Anticipation had been building since the series was announced: an article in *The Listener* on 16 September 1931 reported that arrangements were complete for listening groups to be held in Smethwick, West Midlands, for six nights per week in order to follow the broadcasts. The discussions were to be led by prominent local figures working in each field – for literature, the local librarian; science, the headmaster of the Technical school; and the director of a leading glass manufacturer based in Smethwick, Chance Brothers, was taking the talks on industry and trade.[39] Glowing reports about the reception of this series at a local level continued to flood in, with another notice in *The Listener* reporting a huge increase in demand for copies of the autumn programme, before suggesting that the 'reports which come in from Education Officers, and letters from all parts of the country' testify to the success of the series, and the 'real and genuine public demand for talks of this kind.'[40] The article then quoted from a BBC Education Officer who had visited a group in a remote Warwickshire village for the first talk by John Macmurray: of 147 inhabitants, 29 of them came to the village schoolroom to hear the talk: 'Quietly they listened to his deep thoughts, clothed in simple words, and the discussion which followed showed (as so often in our B.B.C. groups) that the experience of everyday life supplements and confirms the meditations of the learned'.[41] The effect on book sales and library borrowing was also impressive: when Harold Nicolson recommended Samuel Butler's *The Way of All Flesh* in week two of his series, booksellers around the country experienced a phenomenal demand for copies of the book. And *The Listener* editorial for 27 April 1932 offered figures for the number of letters sent in by listeners to each of the 'The Changing World' lecturers, a 'considerable increase' on the previous winter's tally, and a large proportion of which came from the groups.[42] Anxious to capitalise on the popularity of the series, the BBC also responded to requests for further educational programming – such as scheduling a series of history talks to provide further background to Beatrice Webb's lectures on contemporary social problems. In January 1932 a conference was organised at the London School of Economics for leaders of discussion groups across the country to report on 'whether the new programme represents an improvement on the old, whether the extended length of talks and the new form of talks pamphlets are appreciated, and whether the technique of broadcast speakers is now satisfactory'.[43] This was also an opportunity for

leaders to 'pool their experience in regard to methods of group leadership' during 'The Changing World' series, and to talk to some of the speakers from the series: among the attendees were Arnold Plant, Arthur Salter, John Macmurray, Delisle Burns, and Henry Clay.[44] The BBC also offered bursaries for leaders and members of discussion groups wishing to attend.

Conclusion

By any reasonable standards 'The Changing World' was an impressive achievement, drawing on the resources of leading intellectuals and educationists of the day and successfully engaging with individuals, ad hoc gatherings of listeners, and more co-ordinated listening groups. In the months following the series end in March 1932 *The Listener* printed numerous full-page articles looking back on the BBC's activities the previous winter; given that the magazine was BBC-owned and designed as an adult education resource, it is no surprise that its assessment of the series was a laudatory one. In the editorial for 13 April 1932, much was made of the utility and vision of 'The Changing World', which it described as a 'unique example of social self-analysis which could not proceed through any other known medium of publicity in our community except broadcasting'.[45] After acknowledging that the series was in fact mostly planned before 'last autumn's crisis in public affairs', it continued, 'we might almost imagine that the whole series had been devised for the express purpose of illuminating the situation in which we have been groping our way. And thus broadcasting has been discharging one of its most important duties – that of stabilising, informing and unifying public opinion on issues of current significance.'[46] John Macmurray in the same *The Listener* issue joined this chorus of approval, describing the series as a 'monument of achievement' and an example of the BBC taking responsibility for informing the public 'democratically' – that is, communicating ideas 'as free from personal prejudice and from class-prejudice as is humanly possible', working together in a 'common effort to get at the truth from all sides', and 'in simple language – that it might be understood by every listener'.[47] But setting aside these predictably laudatory claims for a moment will allow us to cast a more sober assessment of the impact of this broadcasting experiment. W. E. Williams, writing in 1941, described the series as 'meat far too strong' for ordinary listeners: 'The material was too difficult and often too abstract, the thought too condensed, and the whole intellectual scope too vast to be grasped by their imagination'.[48] That the series also dominated the broadcasting schedule with a prime slot six evenings a week meant that the 'homely and personal talk, grave or gay' was crowded out, and therefore the 'prejudice of many casual

listeners towards talks probably dates from this time'.[49] The series can reasonably be described as a remarkable feat, but the experiment was not repeated, and group listening numbers more generally were starting to fall off within the year. Roger Fieldhouse has discovered that the project had 'faltered' by 1933-34, and 'the optimism generated by their early rapid growth faded'.[50] Although the BBC claimed that wireless listening groups functioned as a bridge for those wishing to embark on more regular study within institutions such as the WEA, there is little evidence that this was the case. The mandate of the Adult Education Advisory Committee (the successor to the Central Council) also expired at the end of 1936, and the Corporation took steps to withdraw from financial and administrative responsibility for group listening.[51] The BBC agreed to pay an annual grant until June 1940, after which the BBC's responsibility for group listening work would be terminated, with no expectation that funds would be forthcoming from other sources. Broadcast talks for groups did continue for some time, but in 1937 a cap on the number per week was put at three, and these were required to be sufficiently broad to appeal to a larger, more general audience. The BBC also ceased promoting the development of discussion groups, which were forced to fend for themselves until 1947, when the scheme officially ended. 'The Changing World' was a product of an early-1930s pioneering vision for adult education, but this heyday was over almost before it had begun.

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‘Wireless Discussion Groups’, *The Listener*, Oct. 14, 1931: 643.

Notes

[1] This Committee spent eighteen months interviewing witnesses and inviting expressions of opinion from organisations and individuals.
[2] When *The Listener*, the BBC's adult education magazine, was established in 1929, Lambert was the obvious candidate to become its first editor.
[3] Area councils were more directly responsible for the promotion of listening groups, selection group leaders, and so on. Each area council has the services of an Education Officer.
[4] Fieldhouse, *History of Modern*, 360.
[5] 'Week by Week', *The Listener*, March 2, 1932: 301.
[6] W. E. Williams discussed the make-up of various groups in *Radio's Listening Groups*, 200-201.
[7] 'First Aid for Discussion Groups', *The Listener*, Dec. 30, 1931: 1128.
[8] 'The New Extension Movement', *The Listener* Sept. 23, 1931: 482.
[9] Williams was a member of the WEA's National Executive and editor of their magazines *The Highway*, *The Travel Log* and *Adult Education*; secretary, from 1934, of the British Institute of Adult Education; he was Editor-in-Chief of Penguin Books, and the creator of the Pelican imprint; he was also the chief advocate for providing education for servicemen and women during the Second World War, and set up the ABCA. He worked closely with the BBC as a regular broadcaster and radio reviewer for *The Listener*, and in 1941 he co-wrote a book, *Radio's Listening Groups*, comparing the successes of the movement in Britain and America.
[10] Williams, *Radio's Listening Groups*, 192.
[11] Ibid.
[12] Ibid.
[13] Ibid., 196.
[14] Ibid.
[15] Ibid., 199.
[16] Ibid.
[17] Listening Groups Report, Rotherham Public Library Group. Contained within folder R/14/29/6, Apr. to Nov. 1937, BBC Written Archives Centre.
[18] Listening Groups Report, Northumberland Local Authority. Contained within folder R/14/29/6, Apr. to Nov. 1937, BBC Written Archives Centre. The 'Men Talking' format was of three or four men discussing a particular subject in a studio before the programme started; this conversation would simply continue after the microphone was turned on, and until the end of the programme slot. The idea was to create a spontaneous conversation, such as might be overheard in a pub, shop, or train.
[19] Despite these aims, many gatherings were premised more on cementing good relations within communities – one report from a rural group noted that 'It was generally agreed that the evening spent was pleasant from a social point of view as well as being informative'; another stated their group 'provides a healthy discharge for repressed extremist emotions. There is a salutary broadening of the mind when extremist meets extremist'. Williams, *Radio's Listening Groups*, 201.
[20] Charles Siepmann, letter to T. S. Eliot, Nov. 17, 1931. Contained within folder 'RCONT 1, Eliot, T. S. Talks: File 1. 1929-1937.' BBC Written Archives Centre.
[21] Ibid.
[22] R. A. Rendall, letter to T. S. Eliot, Mar. 10, 1932. Contained within folder 'RCONT 1, Eliot, T. S. Talks: File 1. 1929-1937.' BBC Written Archives Centre.

[23] Ibid.
[24] T. S. Eliot, letter to Charles Siepmann, Nov. 16, 1931. Contained within folder 'RCONT 1, Eliot, T. S.
Talks: File 1. 1929-1937.' BBC Written Archives Centre.
[25] The broadcasts were sufficiently well-regarded that by October 1931 publisher Allen & Unwin was keen to secure the rights to publish all the talks, organised into volumes to correspond to the various series. These were likely to have been 'tidied up' for publication, though: in a letter to Siepmann in October 1931 on the issue of publication, he insisted that 'I should not want the publisher merely to take the text as delivered on the microphone or as published in the Listener. I mean that in any case of disagreement I might make minor concessions to the B.B.C. but am not prepared to make any concessions for a published text.' T. S. Eliot, letter to Charles Siepmann, Oct. 22, 1931. Contained within folder 'RCONT 1, Eliot, T. S. Talks: File 1. 1929-1937.' BBC Written Archives Centre.
[26] *The Listener* issue of 14 October 1931, for instance, printed (presumably abridged) versions of Harold Nicolson's second lecture in his 'The New Spirit in Literature' series; John Dover Wilson's lecture 'Education Fifty Years Ago' from the education and leisure strand; and the second lecture in Leonard Woolf's series 'Can Democracy Survive?'
[27] Reith vehemently opposed this series, which promised to offer in-depth and largely affirmative discussion of modernist writers. Although Nicolson was eventually allowed to go ahead and broadcast, the row led to the resignation of Hilda Matheson, the BBC Talks Director.
[28] I have written elsewhere about Nicolson's detailed and successful efforts to make sense of the most difficult literature of the period, and his effective strategy of drawing connections between modernist authors and writers with whom listeners would have been more familiar. See Lawrie, 'Appreciative Understanding', 47-8.
[29] Nicolson, 'The Approach', 545.
[30] Nicolson, 'Are Modern Writers Selfish?', 684.
[31] Nicolson, 'In Defence', 780.
[32] Nicolson, 'Intellect and Instinct', 824.
[33] Nicolson, 'Writing of Virginia Woolf', 864.
[34] Nicolson, 'Significance of James Joyce', 1062.
[35] Hobson, *Modern State*, 40.
[36] Ibid.
[37] Ibid., 43.
[38] The others listed were French (6 groups), German (3), miscellaneous (20) and unknown (7). These numbers do not tally with much higher figures quoted at the start of this article; this is because those were the totals for the whole year, rather than each session.
[39] 'Wireless Discussion Groups', *The Listener,* Sept. 16, 1931: 462.
[40] 'Wireless Discussion Groups', *The Listener*, Oct. 14, 1931: 643.
[41] Ibid.
[42] 'A Weighty Post-bag.' *The Listener*, April 27, 1932: 596.
[43] 'Week by Week', *The Listener*, Dec. 2, 1931: 949.
[44] Ibid. A report following the conference noted that 'Warm approval was expressed of the greater continuity of the broadcast lecture courses this winter: while the central theme of all, "The Changing World", has evidently caught their imagination, and given a purpose and point to group listening and discussion.' 'Week by Week', *The Listener*, Jan. 6, 1932: 9.
[45] 'Education for Change.' *The Listener*, April 13, 1932: 524.
[46] Ibid.
[47] Macmurray, 'Landmark in Broadcasting', 538.
[48] Williams, *Radio's Listening Groups*, 182.

[49] Ibid., 183.
[50] Fieldhouse, *History of Modern*, 360.
[51] It paid an annual grant to the Group Listening Organisation the salaries of Regional Education Officers, Educational Engineers, and secretarial staff.